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Pope Trial: What Secret File

By GORDON CROVITZ

NEW YORK—The pope-plot trial seems poised for another bizarre twist when it resumes in Rome on Friday. The next witness will be Christian Roulette, who in recent weeks has been quoted as saying he has secret documents exonerating the Bulgarians and Turks on trial for conspiring in the assassination attempt on the pope, and proving that Mehmet Ali Agca was coached to fabricate the "Bulgarian connection." These reports say the documents were stashed in a Paris bank vault by former Italian secret-service agent Francesco Pazienza. But Mr. Pazienza, interviewed in jail here in New York, says that no such documents exist. And, asked about these reports, Mr. Roulette now says he hasn't seen any files but says he's sure they exist.

Until 1981, Mr. Pazienza was a top aide in SISMI, the Italian military secret service. He lost his job in the scandal surrounding the discovery of P2, an illegal Masonic Lodge whose members included numerous Italian officials, including Gen. Giuseppe Santovito, head of SISMI. Then Mr. Pazienza became associated with Roberto Calvi. When Mr. Calvi's Banco Ambrosiano collapsed, the Vatican lost millions of dollars. Mr. Pazienza is being held in New York awaiting extradition to Italy on fraud charges stemming from the bank failure. He has also been indicted in Milan for being in "subversive association" with fascist terrorists accused of bombing the Bologna train station in 1980.

Attempts to Blame CIA, Others

As if this notoriety were not enough, Mr. Pazienza has become the centerpiece of Soviet-bloc attempts to blame Western intelligence for the plot on the pope. Series have been running in Bulgarian and Soviet newspapers under the banner "On the Track of a Political Provocation," with articles claiming that the Central Intelligence Agency is responsible for the shooting and that the "Bulgarian connection" is a concoction of the Italian secret service, the CIA and right-wing journalists. At one point in the trial, Agca claimed that Mr. Pazienza had indeed visited him in prison to coach him to implicate the Bulgarians. He then recanted, saying that he was just repeating charges that he'd read in the press.

Mr. Roulette, a Paris lawyer, is author of "La Filiere," a 1984 book that is the most complete exposition of the charge that SISMI, the CIA and the Grey Wolf group of Turkish terrorists promoted the shooting and conspired to blame the Bulgarians. Boyan Traikov, a member of the Bulgarian politburo, spoke at the Rome press conference announcing publication of "La Filiere." Mr. Roulette has also acted as attorney for Luigi Cavallo, a fugitive Italian and former Communist Party leader whose Italian-language newsletter, Agenzia A, was among the first to charge a Western plot to kill the pope. American journalist Claire Sterling is suing Mr. Roulette in Italian courts for libel over remarks in his book.

The first report of Mr. Roulette's new claim of documents from Mr. Pazienza was carried on Dec. 13 by the Sofia Press Agency, the official Bulgarian news service. It said that Mr. Pazienza "has deposited in a French bank a file which gives a detailed explanation as to the origins of the 'Bulgarian Connection.'" It quoted Mr. Roulette as saying "I already had the possibility to read this file," and reported that he had requested to testify before the Rome court.

Mr. Roulette's statements about the documents have been accepted at face value in a number of Western news reports. The Italian newspaper La Repubblica described Mr. Roulette as Mr. Pazienza's "Paris lawyer," and quoted Mr. Pazienza as saying that the Bulgarian connection is "hogwash." A New York Times

Mr. Roulette says "perhaps an error" led to quotes about his being Mr. Pazienza's lawyer and having read documents in a Paris bank vault.

dispatch from Sofia on Dec. 22 reported: "This week, Mr. Pazienza said he possessed documentary evidence that is part of a cache of documents deposited in a Paris bank."

Mr. Pazienza, however, branded the claim of secret documents as "ridiculous" when interviewed by this newspaper at New York's Metropolitan Correctional Center. He says Mr. Roulette spread the story "about me coaching Agca and now he is trying to find new ways to justify what he said because his story is falling apart." He said he has not authorized Mr. Roulette to speak as his lawyer, and, in fact, has communicated with him only once. After receiving a letter from Mr. Cavallo, Mr. Roulette's Italian client, Mr. Pazienza says he wrote Mr. Roulette a Nov. 15 letter complaining about "La Filiere."

"I want to show where you have made great errors," opens the copy of the eight-page, French-language letter provided by Mr. Pazienza, "not knowing whether you did so voluntarily or not." The letter contains no reference to any files in any Paris bank vault or any files that would clear the Bulgarians. Its burden is that while Mr. Pazienza is willing to believe someone may have coached Agca, he has no knowledge of it because it would necessarily have taken place after he had left the secret service. He left in May 1981, and Agca didn't implicate the Bulgarians until 1982.

An Italian court, in fact, has closed an investigation into the Soviet-bloc claim that Agca was coached to implicate the Bulgarians. Magistrate Franco Ionta opened the investigation when Giovanni Pandico, an admitted Naples gangster, claimed that Gen. Pietro Musumeci, former deputy director of SISMI, and Mr. Pa-

zienza had visited Agca in jail. The purported visit was said to have occurred in 1982, a year after both Messrs. Musumeci and Pazienza, who have consistently denied any such visit occurred, had left the secret service. Mr. Ionta dropped his investigation when he found no evidence of any coaching.

Mr. Pazienza also gave a deposition to investigating magistrate Ilario Martella in New York on Dec. 10. Mr. Pazienza says that, based on information he gave, "Judge Martella fully recognized my total innocence with regard to the charge that I was involved directly or indirectly with Ali Agca. My documentation on this point was fully accepted by him."

As for Mr. Roulette's more recent claims, Mr. Pazienza says, "I think someone is sponsoring Mr. Roulette to say these things." He says the claim of secret files "looked like the work of the Fifth Directorate," which is the disinformation department of the KGB.

Reached at his home in suburban Paris at an unlisted number provided by the Bulgarian Embassy in Washington, Mr. Roulette says, "It was perhaps an error of expression on my part" that caused him to be quoted as saying both that he was Mr. Pazienza's lawyer and that he had read files in a Paris bank vault belonging to Mr. Pazienza. He insists, though, that "files absolutely do exist showing how the Italian secret service collaborating with some Americans created the 'Bulgarian connection.'" He added, though, that he hasn't seen any such files and acknowledged that Mr. Pazienza never mentioned any files in any Paris bank vault.

Three Possible Verdicts

The Rome trial is expected to end within the next several weeks. Agca has assaulted his own credibility throughout, claiming to be Christ and giving conflicting evidence. While he has never retracted the Bulgarian connection, much of the evidence remains circumstantial. There are three possible verdicts. The Bulgarians and Turks could be found guilty or fully acquitted or "acquitted for lack of sufficient evidence." This last verdict differs from a full acquittal in indicating that suspicions remain but there is not enough evidence to convict.

In the end, the Rome court will have to sift through conflicting testimony and try to winnow the truth from the half-truths and the outright lies. This episode of the files-that-never-existed illustrates the extraordinary propaganda effort to protect the Bulgarian secret-service officers from the conclusion that the evidence and motive combine to show that it was the Soviet bloc that wanted the Polish pope dead. If there is not a conviction, the communist propaganda machine will no doubt redouble its efforts to say who did arrange the pope shooting if it wasn't the Bulgarians.

Mr. Crovitz, a Journal editorial writer, wrote extensively about the Agca case in his former post as editor of the Wall Street Journal/Europe editorial page.